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# ASSESSING NORTH DAKOTA'S OUTDOORS

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## Governor Hoeven Looks at Challenges, Opportunities

Story and Photos by Craig Bihrlé

North Dakota Governor John Hoeven's first experiences as a hunter were probably similar to those of a lot of kids who first went afield in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the 40-somethings of today who, in the era before steel shot, got a .410 – a light weight but underpowered firearm – as their first shotgun.

"I was about 12 years old," Governor Hoeven recalled recently, on the eve of his first hunting season as governor. "My dad got me a .410 shotgun and we went hunting for ducks and geese. The ducks flew so fast it was hard to get them, and the geese, I could swear I hit them but it was awfully hard to bring them down."

A frustrating outing, the Governor admits, but not one that spoiled his interest. Redirected somewhat, perhaps, because these days when Hoeven finds time to head afield it's usually after upland game, particularly pheasants.

Last fall, understandably because of the election campaign, was the first year Governor Hoeven didn't get a chance to hunt since he moved back home to North Dakota after college. While he missed the time in the field, he had plenty of opportunity to talk hunting – and fishing – once the 2001 legislative session got underway.

Several major issues surfaced or resurfaced during the session, and still others not related to legislation required attention. To follow up on some of those concerns, *OUTDOORS* asked Governor Hoeven if he would discuss some of the issues for our readers.

Following are excerpts from a conversation between Governor Hoeven and Craig Bihrlé, North Dakota Game and Fish Department communications supervisor. Questions are highlighted in boldface text, the governor's responses are in regular text.

**Tell us about your outdoor experiences growing up.**

I can't remember when I started fishing. I was just a kid, but for as long as I can remember I've been a fisherman. It's not that we fished a lot, but throughout my life we not only fished around North Dakota, but in Canada, Montana, other places. I enjoy it. My wife Mikey really enjoys it. And we have a boat, so during the summer we'll go out as a family. But we don't get out often enough.

The first time I went hunting I was about 12. We weren't out there every weekend, but I've always particularly enjoyed upland game, and my favorite is pheasants. Of course the pheasant hunting has gotten to be so good. When I started we hunted more partridge and grouse, but I've really gravitated to pheasant hunting.

**Did you have a favorite place, a farm that you hunted on, a marsh, a field?**

Sund Manufacturing is located up in Newburg, North Dakota. Paul Sund and Fred Sund, they're good friends of mine, as is Lloyd Sund their father. The Sund brothers knew all the farmers in that area, so we would hunt just off the refuge (J. Clark Salyer) for ducks and geese. We also did a lot of hunting down around Strawberry Lake (near Butte), and that was more as we started moving to pheasant hunting.

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*Left: Governor Hoeven helps son Jack with the fine points of aiming a shotgun.*

I've also hunted throughout much of the western part of the state, in the Watford City area, up in Williston, and the southwest.

**How would you describe your participation as a hunter and angler the past several years?**

Periodic. I still have a strong interest in hunting and fishing, I just don't get as much time to hunt as I would like, especially in recent years. I think last year, when I was tied up with the campaign, was really the first year I can remember really not getting out at all.

**Now that things have settled down a bit, if things ever settle down for a governor, were you able to make some plans for this fall?**

I hope to get out for the opener (pheasant), and I hope to get out at least one other time.

**In a brochure you sent out as part of your campaign last fall, you stated: "A major reason I am running for governor is to preserve all forms of outdoor recreation that make North Dakota a great place to live." Can you expand on that?**

One of the things that I think we need to focus on when we talk about our state, is areas where we lead, where we have a leadership role. And I think in the outdoors, we truly are one of the leaders in the country. We have world class hunting and fishing, great outdoor recreation of all kinds. Hiking, biking, fishing, camping, canoeing, you name it.

We also do a tremendous job in managing our resources. I was over in Minnesota at an event, and I spoke with Bud Grant (retired Minnesota Vikings coach), and you know he hunts and fishes all over. Coach Grant said to me, "you know, nobody does a better job with their game and fish management than your folks, they're really among the leaders in the country. They do a tremendous job."

I believe that to be the case. Hunting and fishing, those are renewable resources that we need to cultivate and continue to develop, and manage very well. Not only for the folks who want to hunt and fish today, but for the future. And so I think we're doing a very good job. I think it's a place where we're very much a leader.

There are other areas, too. Education, energy production, work ethic, the whole gamut of outdoor activities. There are a lot of areas where we lead.

**Last session, legislators debated, as always, a variety of issues related to the outdoors. Did anything that came up in the session surprise you?**

What really came to the fore, in the last legislative session, is the need to strike a balance in terms of hunting and fishing, as far as the rights and the interests of our in-state hunters and fishermen, the rights of property owners, and out-of-state residents who hunt and fish here. That truly is the challenge that we face going forward.

How do we make sure we protect the rights of property holders and the interests of residents, to provide access for hunting and fishing, and also accommodate out-of-state residents to hunt and fish. Obviously, that has a tremendous economic benefit to this state, particularly in our rural areas, and in the western part of North Dakota. These are areas that are challenged economically. Hunting and fishing is a huge economic enterprise, it brings in millions of dollars to our state, and our people.

So I talked to Dean Hildebrand (*Game and Fish director, reappointed by Governor Hoeven last July*) about our plan going forward. It's to make sure that we balance those interests very well. Which means that we need to seek input from all the individuals involved. From property owners, from in-state hunters and fishermen, from the motel owners, the restaurateurs, the guides and outfitters who want to see out-of-state residents come here. We need to gather the information so we can strike the right kind of balance, and we need to communicate, to make sure that we're getting word out to everyone so they understand how we're trying to strike that balance. Everyone can have input, and we need to communicate back so people understand why we're managing things the way we are.

The legislature's also going to continue to be part of that debate, as is the public, all the different groups that have an interest in this process. And that's the way it should be.

Another part of that, which didn't necessarily emerge from the legislature, but comes from our desire to manage our natural resources prudently, is our need to continue to develop our renewable resources. That's where programs like the Game and Fish Department's Private

Land Initiative are so important. We'll basically pay farmers to set up food and cover plots for wildlife; in the case of CoverLocks on a 160-acre quarter section. And the entire quarter is open to hunting.

That enhances the value of the farmland, which is still farmed but now you've got additional trees, forage, cover and food so game populations increase, and you open up more areas for hunting. To my way of thinking, that's significantly improving the state, both for us now and for future generations.

The legislative debate really focused my thinking on those priorities. We need to balance these interests, we need to communicate well, and we need to build our state's resources with programs like CoverLocks.

**Because of our abundant resources, an increasing number of nonresidents are coming to North Dakota to hunt each fall. This has sparked lively debate over the past few years. Now, an interim legislative committee is charged with studying the nonresident issue, and making recommendations to the next legislative session. Do you see yourself having an active role in how that issue is eventually resolved?**

I think the interim legislative committee is a very important venue for legislators to get input from the public on "what is the right balance? How should we approach this?"

Not only will that likely result in some legislation based on the input we get, but it will also help us in terms of how we manage our game and fish.

The same is true with caps (setting a limit on the number of nonresident licenses the state sells). We already have the ability to cap how many out-of-state waterfowl licenses we'll issue. We already obviously limit big game licenses.

*Note: The governor, by proclamation, can limit the number of nonresident waterfowl licenses and establish zones.*

**Do you feel, at some point, that a cap on the number of nonresident licenses the state sells might be appropriate?**

Yes, and we may have to look at more designated regions for licenses, to make sure we spread out the hunting pressure. We're already doing that with big game, and we may have to do it with waterfowl and upland game. As a matter of fact, Dean Hildebrand and I are planning on sitting down here in the next couple of



weeks to talk about that. Should we be looking at some caps now, before we're required to put them in. Should we be looking at some of these caps, again, based on what provides for the best management of the resource.

**The North Dakota badlands are obviously a scenic jewel of the state. How do we continue to protect the integrity of the scenery and aesthetic values, while still maintaining values of other uses, like recreation and commercial interests?**

The state of North Dakota is actively engaged in that discussion. Right now the national grasslands (managed by the U.S. Forest Service) plan is under comment, and will be for the next several months. So we're providing comment on how we feel the national grasslands in North Dakota should be managed.

That obviously affects outdoor recreation, like hunting and fishing, and wildlife management, but it also affects ranchers who lease the property for grazing, and it affects the oil industry. What we're trying to do is strike the right balance in that management plan, between outdoor recreation, livestock production, the oil and gas industry, to make sure that all get fair treatment.

That's also something that we're working on through the roadless initiative. The state of North Dakota has entered into a law suit against the forest service on the roadless initiative.

Our sense is that there should be some roadless areas. There should be areas out there that are pristine, that are wilderness, that don't have roads. I strongly believe that. The final draft plan calls for that. At the same time, I don't think that the forest service should say, in a separate document, "These are where the roads are now and you can never change it throughout time, really no matter what happens or no matter what makes sense." The state of North Dakota needs to be actively involved in ongoing management of those areas.

I don't think anybody should have a greater say in how that's done than the citizens of North Dakota. We live here.

**The word balance comes up a lot. Director Hildebrand talks about that at public meetings as well. Finding that point is difficult.**

The reality is we have to recognize that we're not going to have roads everywhere out there, we're not going to allow oil

development everywhere out there and we're not going to have cattle grazed everywhere out there. We have to recognize that the outdoors in North Dakota is one of the greatest assets we have, and in many respects, something other places don't have. We have to recognize it, we have to preserve it, and we have to manage it. And it has to be an ongoing process over time based on good common sense, and what the citizens of North Dakota want.

Just like you asked about the interim legislative committee, and our legislative sessions. That's a way for citizens to decide, through the input they give. That's the way it should be. Same thing is true with Game and Fish. You've got to draw input, and based on the input we're getting, we're doing a fair job of balancing the interests of North Dakotans.

**These are complex issues. Can we ever resolve them so everybody is happy?**

Well, you know how that goes. If everybody feels like they're giving something, it's probably a fair deal, right? Because everybody's getting something, but they all feel like they're giving something, too.

It's not like you wave a wand and here it is and it's perfect and that's it. It'll be an ongoing process. You asked about caps, well, that's something we need to look at now, and those types of things will be adjusted throughout time. Same thing with designated hunting units.

I think there are things we can do that will enhance our management of these areas. For example, if we're going to have the oil industry out in western North Dakota, which we are, if they're going to drill in a certain spot, then we also have to impress upon them, "okay, you've got to be good stewards of the environment."

Not only there, but in areas where maybe you've had roads before, you have to make sure they get taken out. The counties have to work with us on this too. Sometimes an oil company's built a road to a drilling site or to tanks and the county wants that road kept. They say "well, people started to use that road and let's just keep it there."

We may have to say no, because if we're going to develop oil over in another spot, then we've got to reclaim some of these other spots, so we have these areas where we don't have roads.

I think we have to be actively involved in that process.

**Do the issues related to hunting, fishing and resource management generate a lot of citizen input to your office?**

Yes. And Dean (Hildebrand) does a good job. We redirect most of the input to him, because that's his job. I believe in empowering people to do their job, and I think he does a good job. But yes, I get a lot of folks who come in, legislators, mayors, business people, hunters... I listen to them, but I encourage them to talk to our Game and Fish people. We have experts over there, doing an outstanding job. Those are the folks who need to hear from our citizens. And I have confidence that they'll do a good job.

**If the citizens want to provide input to your office, what's the best way for them to do that?**

The best way to do it is to provide input to Game and Fish, that's where it should go. And then when I sit down with Dean and the other folks from Game and Fish, you guys will have that input, and we'll sit down and make the best decisions that we can. That's really the way it should work.

**Our game populations are high right now and one of the big reasons for that is the Conservation Reserve Program. The next farm bill and the conservation provisions included in it such as the extension of CRP and the renewal of Swampbuster, may have a great influence on hunting and fishing in North Dakota in future years. How would you like to see that farm bill evolve?**

I support the amended bill that representative Larry Combest (R-Texas) and Charles Stenholm (D-Texas) brought to the House floor (which later passed).

It is a good farm bill because it provides a long-term farm policy with a counter-cyclical safety net for our farmers, and it also emphasizes conservation. We need a good farm program because agriculture is the foundation of our economy in North Dakota.

You look at Europe, one of the things they've done through the years, is that they've provided support for their farmers on the basis that it provides for good conservation. And I think that's how you build support for the right kind of farm programs in the United States.

People throughout the urban areas of our country want to know that our countryside is being well managed with good conservation practices, and I think they'll

support the right kind of farm program with that conservation component. The Combest-Stenholm bill has that built into it. It's a good program for our farmers, in terms of a long-term safety net, and it also provides support for the kind of conservation programs that I think will continue to benefit our state from a game and fish standpoint.

**Does the bill have provisions that would relatively maintain the amount of eligible acres for CRP?**

Essentially it maintains the current CRP acreage level, which I think is appropriate because CRP has been tremendous for outdoor recreation and for game populations. But it also takes farmland out of production, so we have to have a balance there too. I think right now we have about 35 million acres (nationwide), it would take it up to about 37.5 million acres.

And it has funding for other conservation programs that are very important, for North Dakota and the entire country.

**Is your office actively involved in lobbying for that bill?**

Yes, I'm working with Representative Combest, and I'm also working to try to get governors to build support with the federal delegations in their states. I'm chairman of the National Governors Association natural resources committee. My two priorities include agriculture and energy. And agriculture includes a portion of this bill that has a very strong farming for conservation provision. So, I'm very active in not only lobbying Congress, but also working with the governors to get support from their respective states.

**Let's talk about the Missouri River a little bit. Changes there obviously have to come from the federal government, much like the national grasslands, land bases within the state that are managed by federal agencies. But obviously North Dakota has a big stake in the outcome. What should be the role of state government in trying to effect change in how that river system is managed?**

The Corps (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) came out and indicated their preferred alternative as far as the management plan for the Missouri River was what's called the spring rise, also sometimes called ebb and flow. Essentially

what it does is mimic the higher spring rise, which maintains higher levels of water in the upper basin. That would stabilize our reservoir levels. It also provides very important protection for some of the species up here like piping plovers, least terns, pallid sturgeon. So it's very important for wildlife, and it's also important in terms of maintaining higher flows in the river and stabilizing water levels, which is vital for our fisheries.

The Corps came out and said, "this is our preferred alternative," the spring rise alternative, which is right. That should be the management plan. I think because of pressure from downstream states, particularly Missouri, they have now backed away from that. Now, they're again considering six different plans, and are going to put them out for comment over the next 18 months.

We're working on a five-state working group of governors and attorneys general, which includes Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming.

As a group, we hope to push the Corps to the right management plan, which is the spring rise alternative option. And we'll push that through political means and legal means if necessary. The Corps is going to go through this process to gather input, but they need to go to that preferred alternative.

Not only is it the right course, the right plan in terms of managing the river, the lakes and the system, it's also the right course in terms of economics. Downstream states point to barge traffic on the Missouri River, but outdoor recreation in the upper basin of the Missouri exceeds the barge traffic dollar value 10 to one. There's about a hundred million dollars involved in the outdoor recreation industry, compared to about a 10 million dollar figure for the barge traffic.

So whether you want to talk in terms of managing the environment, or economic activity, any way you argue it, the spring rise alternative is the right plan.

I think this is going to stretch out over the next 18 months. In the political battle, this can be a tough one and it can take time, but I sure think we have the facts on our side in this.

That's why we're forming the working group, to bring more political pressure to bear, and also legal pressure if necessary. We – Judy Martz, the governor of Montana and Bill Janklow the governor of South Dakota – had agreed with me this spring to sue the Corps if they didn't reduce flows in the river. The Corps did cut the flows back, beginning in mid-April, which is one of the reasons the

lake stayed about five feet higher than projected.

But it's still down, because it's been very dry in the mountains. Right now, the Corps is doing a pretty good job of minimizing flows. They're only letting out enough to cover the downstream municipal intakes and the power plants. But if they get carried away in terms of increasing flows, we're looking at legal action against them.

**You've been in office not quite a year. What are your impressions of the people who hunt and fish and trap in North Dakota?**

Very positive. People in this state like to hunt and fish. And I understand that, because I do to, and my family does. I think they're very respectful of the great outdoors, and respect their fellow hunters and fishermen. It's a great group. I think they have a lot of fun. I think that's a big part of North Dakota.

**It is. For a lot of folks it's the reason that they continue to live here.**

We have one of the highest percentages of families that hunt and fish, compared to almost anywhere in the country. I think only Alaska has a higher percentage.

**Since you're a hunter and an angler, is it difficult to separate yourself, to look at things as a governor who must put the interests of the state before your personal interests?**

I think it's really helpful that I do like to hunt and fish. You know, I'm also very committed to economic development. But I think because I hunt and fish, I understand when folks come in and talk to me about making sure that we preserve the quality of our hunting and fishing. That we're mindful not only of property rights, but the rights of our in-state residents to have access to hunt and fish.

I've been out there wanting to hunt a piece of ground, or having had permission to hunt a piece of ground, and had other hunters there that I hadn't anticipated. I can remember one case, there was a group of folks from Colorado who were hunting the same ground. I had arranged with the farmer a couple weeks ahead of time to be there hunting with some of my buddies, and there's a dozen folks from out of state hunting at the same time. They also had permission, but it created hunting pressure right in that area.

I grew up hunting and fishing when you could pretty much go out and hunt, not anywhere, but an awful lot of places weren't posted. You just went out and hunted.

I don't know if we'll see that much unposted land in the future. That's why I am so committed to some of these programs that will create more open areas for people to hunt and fish without having to pay a fee.

I think it's important to understand this process. I certainly don't have all the answers. But I do think I have an understanding of the issues, and will work for good solutions.

**Do you foresee resolution of some of these issues during your administration?**

I see us doing more in terms of caps, of probably designating regions in some cases to make sure that we're managing hunting pressure. The legislature will be involved, too.

But I particularly want to see us develop more programs like PLI and CoverLocks. Thirty years from now, wouldn't it be nice if through some of these programs we had more trees, more

cover, more game, and more open hunting area, but also still had agriculture, still had these guys out there farming. I think that's a real tangible, significant improvement we can make to our state. That's the kind of concept I get excited about.

I think it's something important we can do for ourselves and for future generations.

**We're riding a high right now. We have record deer populations, record duck populations, a great pheasant population, and yet a lot of folks aren't happy because of the competition that all these high game populations are creating.**

North Dakota does have tremendous resources, and I do think we can continue to build them. We have world-class hunting and fishing. We are a national leader and our challenge is to maintain that. As I mentioned before, we don't have all the answers yet, but these are the kind of positive challenges we want.

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**CRAIG BIHRLE** is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.

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*Father and son look forward to good times ahead in North Dakota's outdoors.*

